



# POST-TRUTH POLITICS: A STUDY OF ELECTION TO PUNJAB LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Jasmeet Singh

Asst. Professor Political Science, Dev Samaj College for Women, Ferozepur.

## ABSTRACT

The Oxford Dictionaries word for 2016 is 'post-truth'. Facts are no longer empirical entities, but a kaleidoscopic mix of anxieties, misunderstandings and myths. The term was originally coined by columnist David Roberts in 2010. It highlighted the change in politics whereby rhetoric was increasingly becoming detached from policy ideas and focusing instead on emotion. Shiv Visvanathan says, "In this collage of partly-empirical data, gossip is often mistaken for gospel". Social media has emerged as breeding ground for this phenomenon. Lies that are widely shared online within a network, whose members trust each other more than they trust any mainstream-media source, can quickly take on the appearance of truth. Post truth politics have been influential in recently concluded Legislative assembly election of Punjab. This paper tries to dig into the prospects of 'post truth' that manoeuvred the electoral process. Secondly, the paper uses comparative study to analyse the effects 'post-truth politics' and its impact in socio-political sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-Truth, media, Punjab Legislative Assembly Election, Hegemony, Alternative Fact, Fake News.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

We are living in the world of lies, and we have had always lived in the world of lies. So what's the fuss about? The philosopher Hannah Arendt explains "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade..."<sup>29</sup> Truth was never seen as a protagonist of politics. Truth and politics were always studied in context and contrast in the realm of philosophers. Brexit and Rise of Trump are two mammoth events forced the public to juxtapose truth and politics. Thus began the dawn of debate on "Post-Truth" politics. Post-truth is more populist than ideological, thriving on gossip, suspicions and a sense of alienation from politics. Post-truth (according to The Oxford English Dictionary) means *relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief*. Following lines from Irish poet William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" gives the picture of post-truth world dynamics:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
More anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity."

People like Boris Johnson claimed during the Brexit debate that the £19 billion saved by quitting the European Union would go to the under-funded National Health Service, people believed him. Of course as soon as the referendum was won, Brexiters quickly rowed back from the claim. Propagandists speak in such a way that the targeted people believe and accept disinformation as information. The U.S. election was explicitly about brazen lies and also about the indifference of the voters to obvious lies. Facts seem like illusions while the latter become facts. The charisma of political leadership is now nothing more than propaganda. It is as if Watergate politics has become the DNA of all politics. Shiv Visvanathan describes Trump was a caricature, a bit of a carnival who became real. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party saw it coming. He appeared like a drunken peddler offering patent medicines to cure contemporary politics. Next to him, Hillary Clinton looked packaged, sophisticated and predictable. Yet, Trump appeared truer than Clinton. People no longer have thrust for 'the truth'. Rather they create their own preference of truth that may even eclipse the facts.

Politics in Punjab, much like politics anywhere, has established a dichotomy with truth. The notion that only American politics reflect post-truth world will feel a serious jolt when details of election campaign in Punjab are analysed. Emotional appeals, unrealistic promises and gigantic lies dominated the campaign. Decorated with Fake News, populist propaganda and alternative facts, February 4 election in Punjab didn't have an iota less of post-truth than United States of America.

## 2. ELECTION TO PUNJAB LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (2017):

Punjab Legislative Assembly elections were held on 4 February 2017 to elect the 117 members. The counting of votes was done on 11 March 2017 and as a result Indian National Congress led by former Chief Minister Amrinder Singh won the elections winning 77 seats with 38.5% vote share. Second most seats were won by Aam Admi Party (AAP). AAP won 20 seats and 2 seats were won by its allied Lok Insaaf Party (LIP). AAP managed 23.7% vote share and LIP had 1.2% share. Former ruling alliance, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) could with only 18 seats, 15 and 3 respectively. However, they still managed 25.2% and 5.4% vote share respectively. Bhujan Samaj Party (BSP) couldn't manage to win a single seat and held just 1.5% vote share. The voter turnout for the Punjab Assembly election was 77.36%.

Interestingly, not even a single independent candidate won any seat. Once a breeding ground for communists, Communist Party Of India, just managed 0.2% votes (34074) in Punjab. People were not excited for NOTA (None Of The Above). NOTA got just 0.7% vote share<sup>4</sup>.

Most of the Opinion Polls and exit polls predicted victory of INC, however, the magnitude of victory even amazed their calculations. AAP, the first time competent was seen as the crusader of established order and personification of anti-establishment wave. No doubt they emerged as second largest party, their expectations were heavily crushed. INC, the grand old party, led by former chief minister Amrinder Singh, was seen as an embodiment of stability and order. While 10 year rule of SAD was under deep pressure from anti-incumbency factor along with other issues of public dissatisfaction.

Antonio Gramsci used the term hegemony to denote the predominance of one social class over others (e.g. bourgeois hegemony). This represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and 'natural'. Social media was used by all political outfits to establish their hegemony. Each side struggled to establish their notion of 'common sense'. For the propagation and domination of one's own narrative all the political fronts asserted their own version of truth. It was as if the election is between INC's truth vs. SAD's truth vs. AAP's truth.

## 3. POST-TRUTH: MECHANISM OF ESTABLISHING NARRATIVE AS TRUTH

According to Michel Foucault, power and knowledge are inexorably intermingled, we have narrative, and we don't have truth. Consequently, the narratives propagated by the power elites acquire hegemony. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true<sup>6</sup>.

The three major political parties worked for construction of their own narrative as true. Lies had always been part of politics, but the way in which the lies are accepted and truths are constructed is essential feature of post-truth world.

**A) Drug issue:**

Addressing a rally organized by the National Students Union of India (NSUI) at Panjab University campus, Rahul Gandhi said "what is happening to human resources in Punjab. 7 out of 10 youth have the problem of drugs". This unrealistic figure of 70% was widely circulated and used in congress campaigns. Similarly, Punjab deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal in February 2016 had said that "out of the 2.77 crore population of the state, only 0.06 percent was found abusing drugs, which is the lowest percentage across the nation". The study on whose base Mr Badal made that claim was the AIIMS finding that there are 837 opioid-dependents per 100,000 people in Punjab, or 0.84 percent of the state's 28 million population. At national level the figure is 0.25 percent, which is less than one-third of that in Punjab. AAP furiously accused Bikramjeet Singh Majitha, brother-in-law of vice-chief minister as 'drug-lord'. Though, Mr Majitha was never questioned as accused in any drug case far from being convicted by court, his name was glued to drug paddlers.

INC and AAP accused then government led by Mr Parkash Singh Badal in synthetic drug expansion, while SAD expressively campaigned the drug-issue as a plot to 'defame' Punjab by 'out-siders'. Exaggerated promises were made to end drug menace. Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) convener and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal promised that his party would end the drug menace and mafias in Punjab within a month<sup>8</sup>. "AAP had promised to eradicate the drug menace in four months... I will solve it in four weeks..." said Captain Amrinder Singh at Bathinda rally taking Gutka sahib (Sikh holy book) in his hand.

Neither was drugs an issue which appeared all of sudden in Punjab, nor can it be eliminated in weeks. Drug issue seen in isolation is hollow and could only be checked by enhancing social and economic security of youth. The promises to end drug trafficking and counter-claims of ruling party of drug issue is to defame Punjab, were equally hollow and compromised truth. Yet, people on either side of spectra believed their narrative to be true. In the age of post-truth, facts don't matter. Feelings do. So, finger pointing is more effective than building political consensus to end a menace that has the capacity to destroy an entire generation.

**B) UNEMPLOYMENT**

Farmer suicide had been the core issue of the politics in Punjab after drug menace. Farmer suicide is consequence of stagnation in employment. As the productivity in Punjab is nearing its peak, Punjab needs alternative employment avenues to reduce the burden from agriculture sector. In spite of a low revenue growth, the Punjab Cabinet cleared the recruitment of 1.14 lakh people in various state government departments<sup>9</sup>. The claim was unrealistic.

Congress during campaign promised that after coming to power one job would be provided per household to each youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years and till such employment, the registered youth would be given an unemployment allowance of Rs 2500 per month, for a period of up to 36 months. According to House hold data census 2011, there are 17, 12,303 households in Punjab. So that means 17 lakh jobs which is many more times the unrealistic claims of SAD. The claims by AAP of providing 25 lakh jobs were miles away from fiscal reality. None of the parties provided the source from which such large number of jobs will be created.

**C) DIASPORA**

While the recently sworn-in Trump administration in the US is determined to make immigration to the country as tough as possible, the ruling Akali Dal in Punjab has promised in its manifesto for the Assembly polls on February 4 that it will acquire one lakh acres of land, mainly in the US and Canada, which would be made available to Punjabi farmers who want to relocate. The party says it will help the Punjabis in getting US and Canadian visas so they can emigrate and work in the vast stretches of agricultural lands available there. Parties tried every ploy to nail in foreign diaspora support. For that they made hefty claims and promises.

As diaspora from Punjab is mostly Sikh<sup>11</sup> and have radical sentiments at large, their alliance with congress is always on slippery ground. Akalis accused of diluting the Sikh thought are never the favourites. AAP, visualising this opportunity harnessed huge support from NRIs. Also, the economic development, rule of law, good governance, and education and health facilities in West filled them with desire to groom such capabilities 'at home' i.e. Punjab. The slogans of AAP against nepotism, corruption, mis-governance, favouritism and policy stagnation appeased the diaspora.

All the parties showed unrealistic dreams and harnessed handsome funds. The nostalgia of diaspora was cooked with spices of lies. Even Deputy Chief Minister's claim of making Punjab California, or AAP's claim of ending mis-rule in months, were lies that were easily digested by people with dream of larger good.

**D) FAKE NEWS:**

President William McKinley's closest political adviser Mark Hanna is sometimes described as the first political consultant. However, in Indian Politics the idea of hired political consultant is of recent origin. Prashant Kishore, the successful election strategist of Narendra Modi in 2014 Lok Sabha polls who later worked for Nitish Kumar in Bihar assembly election, provided his services to Congress to plot a comeback in Punjab assembly election. Interestingly, Infor-

mation and Technology cell was developed by all political fronts either to promote or counter 'fake news' that were circulated on social media.

Just before votes were cast, a letter ostensibly written in Hindi by AAP's Punjab affairs in-charge Sanjay Singh was circulated on social media. Written on the official AAP letterhead, it asked Kejriwal to start maintaining a distance from the Punjab campaign just in case the party loses, as Congress's popularity was growing.

Letter was circulated making almost the same argument in English; it had Prashant Kishor writing to Sonia Gandhi asking her to stay away from Punjab. Then a colour-coded map, allegedly prepared by Punjab police's intelligence wing, was the hottest forward on WhatsApp a week before polling. It gave a massive majority to one of the opposition parties. On February 3, another fake letter was circulated. This time it was on the letterhead of the highest temporal seat of Sikhism – the Akal Takht – asking people not to vote for Akali Dal for taking support of Dera Sacha Sauda in Sirsa.

**4. DISCUSSION AND RESULT:**

Today an entire flourishing genre of television goes by the name "reality," yet no one who watches it thinks it is genuinely real — that is, unplanned and unedited. Artificiality is what makes reality television enjoyable, even though these same shows, if advertised as fiction, would appear banal, repetitive and undramatic. Reality is the ingredient that turns a bad fiction into an enthralling one<sup>12</sup>. The problem with our "post-truth" politics is that a large share of the population has moved beyond true and false. They thrill precisely to the falsehood of a statement, because it shows that the speaker has the power to reshape reality in line with their own fantasies of self-righteous beleaguement.

It is not important to know how we can differentiate lie and post-truth. Rather, it need to be emphasises on what happens to a lie in post-truth politics. Well, the answer is, the lie becomes an 'alternative fact' or simple a favourable narrative. In Indian politics we have devised a beautiful word called 'jumla'<sup>14</sup> for post-truth lie that had been ignored by public at large for larger good they assume.

As we have seen in Punjab, the lies plattered by political parties we believed by people. The people choose that narrative of fact which they feel is correct. Checking the authenticity of facts is old fashioned. The narrative of congress was accepted by masses as it had all the elements of Persuasion for post-truth society, like

- Fear ( INC propagated fear of outsiders in AAP taking over Punjab alike Trump's anti-immigration narrative),
- Hope (re-building Punjab alike Trumps' making America great again),
- Authenticity ( Taking oath on Gutka sahib alike trump swearing by God),
- Anti-status-quoist-politicians ( ' People's maharaja narrative implied Captain Amrinder wasn't there for politics but for action alike Trump's claim of being a successful businessman and not a politician)

**5. CONCLUSION:**

As discussed earlier lies have never been alien to politics. But present notion of untruth politics have two fundamental differences. Firstly earlier notion of untruth were not about democratic politics. It was about capitalism or imperialism. Secondly, earlier knowledge was propagated through institutions and academic media, and not social media. "A lie told once remains a lie but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth." says Joseph Goebbels. Social media enhances the repetition of lie many folds. People on social media share their narrative as truth vigorously. Truth behind the narrative is never desired.

In Punjab, the social media provided parallel playground for local Punjabis and Non Resident Indian (NRI) Punjabis. Even the people who didn't vote propagated their narrative. People not only think truth is essential when they discuss politics but also tend to think that the truth they hold is the only truth that is possible. People redefined politics in a way that made sense to them. Ordinary people chose political facts that they could define and determine, even if the result was a curdled populism. Post-truth politics is a return to the primordial, the primitive, the irrational, and challenges the logic of institutionalism.

If Brexit signalled the post-truth era, Donald Trump's victory was its definitive arrival. People have even behaved unexpectedly to demonetisation. They waited patiently at ATMs without criticising the government as an act of patriotism. To conclude as Shiv Visvanathan says "Perhaps the term is premature. But sometimes when a word is born, a world is born with it. Post-truth might be one such word. A performative word that one senses might enact the politics of the future. We have to wait and see if it will be a promising future"

**REFERENCES:**

1. "The year we reinvented the truth", Shiv Visvanathan, The Hindu 31-12-2016
2. Essay in the 'The New Yorker' titled "Truth and Politics" by Hannah Arendt.
3. William Butler Yeats (3 June 1865 – 28 January 1939) was an Irish poet and one of the

foremost figures of 20th-century literature. In December 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

4. <http://eciresults.nic.in/>
5. Michel Foucault (15 October 1926 – 25 June 1984) was a French philosopher, historian of ideas, social theorist, philologist and literary critic. His theories addressed the relationship between power and knowledge, and how they are used as a form of social control through societal institutions. He is often cited as a post-structuralist and postmodernist.
6. Foucault, in Rabinow 1991
7. Punjab Opioid Dependence Survey (PODS), conducted by the Society for Promotion of Youth & Masses (an NGO) in collaboration with the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (Aiiims), was not about all drugs, but just one type of drug — opioids.. What the PODS revealed, though, is something completely different. "Based upon the analysis of the data, around 76 percent of opioid dependent individuals in Punjab are in the age group of 18 to 35 years," the report had said.
8. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/aap-will-end-punjab-drug-menace-in-a-month-claims-kejriwal/story-IwneQqnwmcmY6mGbAxyrYL.html>
9. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/governance/punjab-clears-1-14-lakh-govt-jobs/160254.html>
10. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2017/feb/03/why-punjab-diaspora-is-with-kejri-1566353.html>
11. Punjabi NRIs, predominantly Sikh, number about two million— around 8 per cent of the 25 million- strong Indian diaspora. However, 85 per cent of Punjabi NRIs are now concentrated in Europe, the US and Canada.
12. the 25<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.
13. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/books/lie-to-me-fiction-in-the-post-truth-era.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/books/lie-to-me-fiction-in-the-post-truth-era.html?_r=0)
14. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Opposition-targets-Amit-Shah-for-black-money-remark/articleshow/46136285.cms>